

The use of referencing: An investigation into current practice

Sue Barnes, John Gardener, Pete Moody
Worcester Business School
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Abstract:

The use of rigorous referencing of sources is routinely expected by academic staff when marking assignments. Following discussion with some students who present at cheating interviews there is evidence to suggest some instances of scant knowledge or recall of formal guidance regarding referencing or information literacy. Undergraduate students are routinely asked to use the resources provided by the university (electronic and hard copy) and the university's own Harvard Referencing guide to fulfil the requirements of their research projects and assignments. However, a holistic approach to when and indeed if they learn about referencing and use of resources was not initially identified.

The audit under discussion took place to ascertain current practice within the Business School. A snapshot was taken of undergraduate modules in semester 1 2012/13. In addition, students' perceptions of and engagement with the referencing process was elicited, together with the perceptions of their tutors and key staff members.

Evidence suggests a variety of experiences. Some student report a good experience regards learning about and using referencing sources. Some students have reported conflicting feedback or no recall of taught sessions about information literacy resources or about the presentation of references. Tutors have all mentioned they have presented taught sessions with exercises, or have invited the Business School librarian to guide students. All tutors report that they have directed students to the university Harvard referencing guide for the way their sources should be presented.

Findings from this audit are documented in summary form herein. The report culminates with suggestions to inform future practice in an attempt to eradicate misconceptions and suggest a way forward for rigorous learning, teaching and engagement with the whole process of information literacy and referencing for assignments and projects.

Rationale for the study:

There have been recent internal discussions between tutors, the WBS integrity tutor and students at preliminary suspected cheating interviews involving information literacy and referencing. These discussions have identified a possible issue with referencing of sources by some students within their submitted assessments whereby they report no memory of receiving formal guidance. In light of these comments and the university's aim to enhance academic learning and improve retention this research was felt to be necessary to gain an understanding of the current situation.

Research objectives:

To audit, observing confidentiality,

- where referencing and information literacy skills are taught (audit of mandatory module schedules)
- when referencing and information literacy skills are taught (audit of module outline)
- how referencing and information literacy skills are assessed (audit of assignment briefs and marking sheets)
- students' perceptions
- tutors' and key staff perceptions

Methodology:

Phase 1

- Audit of undergraduate mandatory module documentation including outlines and assessment briefs for semester 1 mandatory modules 2012/13
 - (5 Computing, 6 Business, 4 HND)
- Audit of undergraduate module documentation for all other modules including outlines and assessment briefs for semester 1 2012/13
 - (13 Computing, 31 Business)

Phase 2

- An online survey link sent to all WBS undergraduate students (1000) seeking their response to 20 questions). Eight student groups were targeted covering level 4, level 5, level 6, Computing, Business and HND. Questions covered '*early experiences of referencing*', '*assessment experiences*' and '*personal opinions*'. In addition Level 6 students were invited to a follow-up focus group to help gain a more in-depth understanding of perceptions. However, this did not actually take place due to poor follow-up responses.

Phase 3

- An additional perspective was gained by inviting lead tutors from mandatory modules (5 Computing, 6 Business, and 1 HND) to interview to ascertain their perspectives of teaching and assessment and to ascertain their personal opinions. The Business School link librarian also provided a synopsis of her contact with students during semester 1.

Findings:

The documentation

		COMPUTING	BUSINESS	HND
	Total number of modules (59)	18	37	4
A	Mandatory modules (15)	5	6	4
	Explicit reference in ILO or schedule, or both	1	4	1
	Reading list: Full Harvard list included	4	3	2
	Harvard not used		2	
	Inconsistencies in the use of Harvard		1	1
	No reading list located	1		1
B	Other modules: explicit referencing (11)	3	8	x
	Explicit reference in ILO or schedule, or both	3	8	
	Reading list: Full Harvard list included	1	2	
	Harvard not used	1	1	
	Inconsistencies in the use of Harvard		5	
	No reading list located	1		
C	Other modules: no explicit referencing (33)	10	23	x
	Explicit reference in ILO or schedule, or both	x	x	
	Reading list: Full Harvard list	2	10	
	Harvard not used		1	
	Inconsistencies in the use of Harvard	7	11	
	No reading list located	1	1	

Documentation – Summary

Of the 59 modules scrutinised 18 were Computing, 37 Business and 4 HND. The focus for the in-depth audit was on the mandatory modules. This scrutiny revealed that there was inconsistent practice across modules in terms of the quality and content of reading lists. A scrutiny of the schedules revealed teaching and assessment of information literacy and teaching of the Harvard format, but this was sporadic with some modules expecting prior knowledge. Although instruction in *'evaluating sources'*, *'gathering information'* and *'writing citations and reading lists'* were included in some mandatory modules, the assessment of such items was inconsistent.

For Business, one Level 4 module is taken by all students irrespective of subject specialism. This is also so for one of the Computing modules. Therefore it is not surprising that *'finding sources'* and *'referencing'* is explicit within the documentation. However, for the other mandatory modules some inconsistencies in practice were evident in teaching, assessment and requirements for the presentation of references.

The HND students have dedicated tutorial sessions where different sources are discussed and fed back into requirements for individual modules. However, the course leader reported that still they are not all being rigorous in their practice.

For Computing, the Level 4 professional module makes consistent use of document presentation, teaching and assessment. The module leader is also the Business School Integrity Tutor so gives the students the wider perspective and details about the use of Turnitin and avoiding accusations of cheating.

Students Responses

In total 80 undergraduate students responded to the request for information (8%) via an online questionnaire. They answered questions on *'early experiences of referencing'*, *'assessment experiences'* and also provided their *'personal opinion'*.

	Computing	Business	HND	Total	% of respondents
Level 4	14	9	4	27	33.75%
Level 5	11	17	x	28	35.00%
Level 6	11	14	x	25	31.25%
Total	26	40	4	80	
% of respondents	32.50%	50.00%	5%		

Level 4 (14 Computing, 9 Business, 4 HND = Total 27)

Un-important

- Irrelevant to studying and learning
- Referencing is not important
- Should not be so heavily judged
- Focus more the actual work rather than where the information came from
- It is not the main priority of assignments
- Some students already know a lot without having to use references or read around the subject
- I feel that referencing is more complicated than it needs to be, I would consider making it less lengthy and just have the important parts to it.

Important

- For validity and academic credibility
- It forces you to think about your sources and their value
- Prevents allegations of plagiarism
- You have to give credit for other peoples work
- Quite important as it supports my analytic approaches
- Very, because tutors are reducing my grade because of wrong referencing
- Especially when looking at a real life issue and not stating an overall opinion, for example a marketing report needs strong referencing but analysing a print advert doesn't need as much
- It validates your work by proving that your claims are based on facts.

Other comments

- Currently referencing is too strict
- It should not over shadow the main point of the assignment
- Referencing is too specific
- Its time consuming and I expect references are rarely read through and checked under scrutiny
- Almost every University uses its own version of Harvard referencing
- Referencing would be so much easier if I could use referencing tools like '*Cite This For Me*' website
- I have found it pretty straightforward in some parts but I know that the university is always there to help if I needed it.

Level 5 (11 Computing and 17 Business =Total 28)

Positive experience

- Referencing requires me to look into more sources than I would normally do. I get to know different perspectives.
- I can refer back to sources I have used on previous occasions.
- Valid referencing makes work more credible.
- It supports my arguments and makes my work more valid.
- Some examples in the referencing guide can be confusing.

Negative experience

- Whilst I understand the necessity of referencing, the pernickety attitude of some lecturers is tiresome. If I don't italicise a particular element or put a full stop in the right place it doesn't detract from its semantic validity.
- Referencing is not very important.
- Referencing is dealt with in a very uneven way. Some lecturers follow the book and some hardly care.

Suggestions

- A training session at the start of each semester
- A lecture when you start university and a seminar for each of the modules in first year
- Demonstrating where citations should be placed and what references should look like
- From the beginning of semester 1 in first year. The librarian for example should explain referencing to the students, and that should be the blanket approach, therefore lecturers cannot dispute
- It should be a case if you get an A in referencing for one lecture and you continue that style throughout your modules, therefore get A throughout your modules in referencing.
- Introduce it when you meet the Personal Tutor for the first time
- It should be introduced more thoroughly and maybe go through how it should be done using different examples
- The main sources such as books, journals, websites etc. shown in detail by them showing where to find the information and put it together. Then a brief overview of other sources.
- This should be taught by explaining the reason for references, and how it should be done. This can be done by doing a simple referencing seminar.
- Should be introduced at the beginning and then mentioned again throughout the module and reminded before each assignment.
- First week of lectures in your first year - greatest attendance and gets you set for the year to come
- There should be a session in Induction Week about it and then the individual lecturers should mention it in their lectures.
- I don't think you should have to follow a format. The URL is enough.
- There should be a country wide referencing system which is taught from secondary school, not just thrown in at university.

Level 6 (11 Computing and 14 Business = 25):

Positive experience

- I feel the current booklet method is fine as referencing is one of those things you never fully learn - even seasoned academics have to check how to reference certain information in specific situations.
- I understand that referencing is important for lecturers and students to see where information has come from.
- It's a legal issue so pretty important.
- It's important as you have to back up every statement you make and encourages you to look for more information on the subject.
- It is very important. It helps me locate where I got the information if I want to come back to it. I write everything out before in my note-books, so I can't lose the info.
- I can understand its importance to support arguments.
- Important as shows that a student has done background reading and worked for it.
- I feel it's an academic standard and work is essentially useless without it.
- I understand the importance of using academic-based sources, so I do think it's important as university is about good pieces of research.
- It makes the work professional and trust worthy.
- Strengthens points made.

Negative experience

- I think it is valid; however, I disagree about being penalized due to a reference list as different lecturers give different feedback.
- It doesn't really make my work very valid because they are just ideas that many kids borrow, not their own.
- In university there is not much room to explore your own Ideas and for tutors to assess how well you can project your thinking on paper.

Suggestions

- By showing examples, the guide is good, but isn't always easy to follow if reference don't have dates etc.
- The markers should have the same standards and practice.
- Students should have a list of referencing information and try to 'put them together' in correct order. They also need to receive feedback to their work.
- The first ever lecture at university and maybe dedicate a whole seminar or lecturer on how to reference accurately.
- Tutors should do a step by step run through that explains the placement of information eg Harvard Standard format.
- It should be introduced at the first session of teaching, recapped a week before assignment hand-in and then show mistakes after assignments have been marked with corrections.
- During class with an idea of the resources they recommend students can use to search.
- The very start of University, as I was not taught how to Harvard reference at college.

General comments

- Learning how to reference in class would be unproductive.
- We should know how to reference by now- the university should not need to hold the students hand.
- I don't understand why the assignment should lose marks because of incorrect referencing as long as you have shown to attempt referencing and not ignored it.
- Makes it valid and stops cheating.
- It increases validity - it does not make it valid.
- It reinforces the points I like to make but I do think that independent thinking should be encouraged more and that we shouldn't have to rely on other people's work to create a piece of work. Some concepts, conclusions and links should be allowed to be made without referencing.

Students Responses - Summary

Some of the Level 4 students did not see the need or relevance for referencing and felt that it gets in the way. This attitude changes as they mature through their studies. It was not clear if the Business students who reported that they had not received instruction had actually attended the appropriate module sessions. At all levels students reported that feedback is not specific enough to be helpful.

Even though approximately half of the Level 5 Computing respondents could not remember a session early in their studies, all had a copy of the university Harvard guide, distributed during Induction Week. They too mentioned differences in the quality of feedback received, some being unhelpful. They felt some feedback to be picky about punctuations rather than viewing the overall use of references.

Level 6 respondents gave an in-depth view as most had been at the university for nearly three years. One said the assessment briefs were detailed enough to be useful with regard to referencing requirements and another said that feedback over the three years had helped build up knowledge. However, again some did mention the contradictory nature of feedback between tutors.

Students have picked up on these inconsistencies and report that they work to what individual tutors require rather than sticking to the university Harvard guide. The Business School link librarian visits a number of modules to instruct students on search strategies, available resources relevant to the module or about citations and reference lists.

Q1	Do you tell the students the reasons why they should include citations and references in their work?	
	HND	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are told but I am unsure of the impact this has. We tell them about ensuring it is all their own work and about acknowledging sources.
	Computing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At level 5 we discuss the use of journal articles and how to reference them correctly. They complete an assessed literature review and also cover ethics and copyright. • At level 4 they are taught about referencing and use of Turnitin and the reasons why this is important. We mention the need to not claim work as their own. The use of good citations and referencing shows they have read around the subject, put it in your own words and improved the quality of their discussion.
	Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, they are told they require evidence to support their arguments.
Q2	What resources do you use to teach them about citations and referencing?	
	HND	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Session by the librarian – referencing and resources in the first week on the module. The emerging themes are identified after the marking period and there is a re-focus for part 2 of this session in the first week of semester 2. • ILS has produced a video. • Talk by the Academic Integrity Tutor about integrity and plagiarism. • Individual assessment targets. • Exercises to reference books and websites with examples of good practice. • How to cite law cases and statutes – which have their own conventions.
	Computing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just the module documentation and the university Harvard guide. No specific exercises are given. • The link librarian visits one module where exercises are completed which are relevant to the specific research required for the module.
	Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are taught how to reference and then do exercises in groups so that they can compare when they have done. They have about five attempts throughout the module, but even when they get to level 4 Semester 2 many still do not get it right. • Referencing is re-enforced through discussion papers and it is a good indication of the quality of their analysis. • The university Harvard guide is referred to and it is clearly linked to assignment requirements. • In future our librarian will be producing quizzes so this will be used too.
Q3	How do you assess citations and referencing?	
	HND	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If it does not appear in the ILO it is not in the assessment criteria. However, it is in the ILO for some modules. • Higher grades do appear to draw on suitable sources, poorer grades tend to be limited by their lack of wider reading. • Generic feedback is given to improve grades using more quality resources. If errors then specific feedback is given such as put in alphabetical order. They are also referred to the university Harvard referencing guide. • Minor errors such as missing punctuation would not be penalised but would be mentioned.

	Computing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They cite a book, journal article and website. If they submit it via email they get formative feedback. About 60% do so. • As long as the information is in the correct order. We are not picky about punctuation. • If they only use websites, they are told to use rigorous sources. • They are expected to use journals and if they don't it is mentioned. • They are given journal articles to start them off. • I look for citations and the format of the referencing list.
	Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ILO refers to the professionalism of their presentation. • The feedback sheets have a section.
Q4	Would you consider a grade change for poor citations or referencing?	
	HND	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only if it was in the assessment criteria and only in combination with other issues which were considered to be serious.
	Computing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They would not be failed unless there is a specific requirement.
	Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most likely they are not showing incompetence if they have tried to complete the assignment. • As they are first semester of their first year they would probably not get higher than a D+. Final year students should know better.
Q5	Would you automatically fail an assignment which does not contain any citations or references?	
	HND	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If no references are included at all, they may just pass, but it would depend on the content
	Computing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If there are few or bad references then they might be downgraded but it would also be checked for plagiarism. • I would comment on the need for citations / references.
	Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes it would affect their grade as they would not be considering 'professional presentation' of their work. It is related to their self-discipline.
Q6	Any comments from personal experiences?	
	HND	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring consistency of message, but there is a reliance of everyone using the university Harvard guide and sticking to it. • It is not clear if the WBS module documents template makes universal use of the university Harvard guide.
	Computing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For some students if they have a reference list they don't see the need for citations. • Bad practice is just adding a citation at the end of every paragraph.
	Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a Business School we need to agree standards and all use the university Harvard Referencing guide. • I mention if their punctuation or italics are incorrect.
Q7	Any comments from students' experiences?	
	HND	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The students have referred to being 'referenced to death' and this has generated interesting discussions. This comment was despite some poor evidence being submitted. We have also discussed the use of a wide selection of resources. In semester 2 this was followed up with a session on journal articles.
	Computing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None
	Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They tell me about the inconsistencies experienced.

Comment from WBS librarian

Semester 1 input into WBS modules:

18 Sep 2012		Placement students	Eresources / referencing
20 Sep 2012	induction	Business direct entrants	Eresources
21 Sep 2012	Induction	Business direct entrants	referencing
25 Sep 2012	Week 1	HND level 4	Eresources
28 Sep 2012	Week 1	HND level 4	referencing
8 Oct 2012	Week 3	COMP1211	Eresources
8 Oct 2012	Week 3	COMP2241	Eresources
15 Feb 2013		HND level 4	Eresources

The WBS librarian holds regular weekly sessions where she is available to answer questions and help staff and students with their search strategy, referencing requirements and general resource issues. She has reported that in general, questions tend to revolve around referencing individual types of sources, such as web pages, e-books etc. She is also asked about how to do secondary referencing, how to cite when there is more than one author, finding the author and/or year for a web page/site. Most of this is covered in the referencing guide so she refers many queries to the university Harvard referencing guide.

Staff Responses - Summary

In discussion with tutors it became clear that the reasons for the use of referencing, wide and appropriate reading and use of Harvard was taught in mandatory modules. However, the impact on the students was unclear. Feedback comments about referencing were commonplace. All referred students back to the Harvard guide rather than given examples within the feedback. Example exercises were used in some modules and formative feedback offered.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that all students are introduced to resources and referencing during Induction Week, or very soon thereafter.
- Include clear reasoning about the purpose of using rigorous sources particularly journal databases, as well as guidance on accessing them.
- Ensure that all students are given a hard copy of the university Harvard referencing guide during Induction Week, or very soon thereafter.
- Include a re-enforcement session between weeks 1 – 3 in one mandatory module at each level.
- Include a module specific re-enforcement in all modules before the first assignment deadline, which adheres to the format suggested previously.
- Consolidate feedback at the beginning of semester 2 in all modules.
- Develop a clear search strategy in all level 5 and level 6 modules.
- Audit documentation during the moderation process across levels to ensure parity of format and message.
- Tutors to be aware of what is happening in other modules and reinforce the accepted format.
- Academic Tutors include a discussion about assignment feedback comments in their meetings with their tutees.
- Develop an online tool for the Worcester Harvard System or use a suitable online tool and tailor the Worcester system to that to ensure parity of experience.
- Ensure there is standard practice across the Business School.

Conclusion:

The introduction suggested that we have *'opened a can of worms'* however the quick conclusion would be *'you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink'*.

Many students and tutors are confident that good practice is evident. However, it is the small minority of students who do not understand the relevance of engagement with information literacy and references practices who we must strive to *'catch'*. Academic tutors have an important role to play when they meet their tutees individually or in small groups. This is a golden opportunity for close questioning to ensure that students understand the reasons for rigorous practice and adherence to university referencing guidance.

The authors suggest that there is scope to extend this study to audit:

- how students are informed (audit of feedback to students in mandatory modules)
- comments from students involved in WBS preliminary cheating interviews
- Longitudinal tracking of students (from level 4 to level 5)